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ABSTRACT

This booklet for teachers describes and explains classroom management based on a student centered format for structured freedom using contracts, learning stations, and learning packages. The booklet is structured as a narrative describing a fictional teacher's visits to a classroom where this approach is successfully implemented. Structured freedom is a way to allow students to make choices and take risks within a given structure while providing opportunities for self-directed learning. At a learning center students gather to make choices, to get instructions and materials, and to meet with others working on related activities. A learning package includes all necessary materials and all instructions written down so that a student can work independently. Contracts are vehicles to ensure that planned activities are accomplished and that teacher and student have the same expectations. These techniques are applicable to all educational levels. Successful implementation provides control through clear objectives and instructions and simple beginnings. Also included in the booklet are examples of classroom layout, checklists for developing learning packages and centers, a sample contract, an evaluation list for deciding when to use centers and packages, a list of considerations and tips, and an outline of the teachers role in this type of classroom. (Contains 31 references.) (JB)

CENTRED

ON STUDENTS

ED 380 423

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Instructional Strategies Series No. 14

Saskatchewan Professional Development Unit • Saskatchewan Instructional Development and Research Unit

PREPARED FOR

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and
The Saskatchewan Instructional Development and Research Unit
by

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Moving theory into practice, the documents in the Instructional Strategies series are written with experienced teachers in mind - professional people choosing to expand their own repertoires.

Working with an advisory committee of practising teachers and consultants, authors research and develop each topic thoroughly, distilling theory into practical applications. The resources listed in each document are provided for readers who want to delve deeper into the Strategy, further developing their teaching practices and philosophies of education.

These interactive documents are intended to leave readers with a feeling of "Yes, I can try this with my students!"

We hope you enjoy working with this resource. Your comments and suggestions are always appreciated.

Paul Hart

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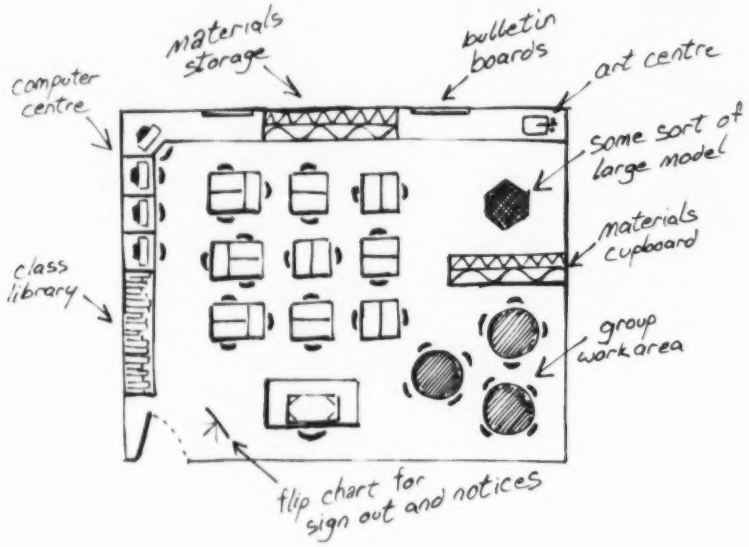
Centres, Packages and Contracts in the Classroom

A Look Inside...

As you stand at the door of the classroom, your attention is first caught by the sound—a general buzz. Listening more closely you recognize the buzz is purposeful. As you enter the classroom your attention is drawn to the appearance of the room—lots of visuals and plenty of activity. Students are clustered throughout the room working on a variety of activities that appear to have a common thread. There are students writing, some individually and some in partners and threes, at tables and desks. A group of students is building a paper mache model in the back area. A few students are working at computer terminals.

A chart by the door indicates that two students have left the classroom to arrange interviews with community members and two groups of three students are researching in the resource centre.



Then you spot the teacher— active, circulating around the different work areas, working with individuals and small groups, asking, guiding, clarifying questions, providing support, finding extra materials, and taking advantage of teachable moments. Every once in awhile you notice that the teacher slips out to check with students working outside of the classroom. The students in the classroom continue on, appearing not to even notice the teacher's momentary absences. You are struck by how smoothly things seem to run even when students are moving in several different directions. How did this happen? Luckily you have a chance to meet with the teacher after class.

STRUCTURED FREEDOM

The teacher indicates that this class was organized around centres, packages, and contracts which offer the students freedom to make choices and take risks within a given structure while providing opportunities for self-directed learning—some of the major contributing factors to positive self-esteem. The teacher finds that with increased self-esteem comes increased personal resourcefulness, and more positive attitudes toward school, studies, and other students, AND fewer discipline problems.

"Centres, packages, and contracts are opportunities for choice, practicing skills, and decision making in a safe environment. I find that by using contracts, centres, and packages I can individualize to a greater extent for the wide variety of students I have in this class. These opportunities for choice and self direction also foster life-long learning attitudes and skills."

You take notes as the teacher talks...

CENTRES, PACKAGES AND CONTRACTS:

- *individualize in classrooms where there is an extensive range of student needs*
- *actively involve students*
- *are experience-orientated*
- *stretch the imagination*
- *offer enrichment activities*
- *are open-ended*
- *address learning styles and modalities*
- *are permissive yet secure*
- *motivate students*
- *provide additional variety in instruction*
- *facilitate diagnostic/prescriptive learning*
- *provide an opportunity for teachers to learn a lot about their students and what makes them "tick"*
- *allow more individual student-teacher contact*
- *are self-directed and provide an opportunity to be successful*
- *provide an atmosphere for teacher and students to share and exchange knowledge*
- *develop skills needed for self-directed learning and student responsibility*

You ask the teacher to explain a little more about centres, packages and contracts because they seem to be very similar.

"I see them as different aspects of the same thing. For me, a centre is a place that is set up for the students to go to make choices, get instructions and materials, and to meet with others working on related activities—a meeting place of sorts.

"I see a package as more comprehensive and student-directed than any single centre. In a package the student may be referred to centre choices but this is just a portion of the work. For example, in math I have used packages to develop self-paced units of study so that at any given time students can be working in a variety of areas. When I prepare the packages, I have to make the same kinds of decisions I do in long-range unit planning and lesson planning. but everything is written down for students to work through independently so the instructions have to be very clear. In the package there may be materials the student must master before moving onto the next section so testing points are built in along the way. Testing points are a logical time to be sure to meet with students to check on their progress...when everyone might be at a different place, record-keeping and staying in touch are crucial! Here is a handout of key things to remember when designing a learning package. I have found it helpful over the years."

Developing a Learning Package
1. Select the concept around which the package is to be built.
2. Write the rationale (or the "why are we doing this?" statement).
3. Write the objectives, in terms the students will understand, for each section of the package.
4. Develop activities for each section providing options from which students can choose.
6. Create the pre and post-tests that will help in decision-making about sections of a package that need more emphasis for individual students.
6. Order the contents of the package and put it together.
7. Keep a copy for yourself to mark changes on as the students use them for future reference.

You file this away for future reference as the teacher continues...

More Time For Students

"Because there are so many materials needed at the same time when students are working at their own pace, and they don't need the same things at the same time, I set up centres for the students to use as they need them. Packages are an opportunity for me to tailor-make instruction for the individual students in my class for independent study. I also have more opportunities to work with students individually. Although the record-keeping and marking of daily work keep me busy after class, I find I have more time in class for really working with the students.

"Contracts, I use as a vehicle to make sure things get done and that we all have the same understanding of expectations. Students use contracts as decision making vehicles so they know where they are going and what they are going to accomplish. I always encourage students to come to me along the way if they feel what they have discovered in doing their initial work changes how the contract might develop. We can change the contract so it continues to meet the needs of the learner while retaining the integrity of the original purpose."

The teacher reaches into a nearby filing cabinet and pulls out a brightly colored sheet.

"This is a contract the students and I found useful for a unit we were doing on mammals. I developed this from a sample I found in an article about learning contracts and middle years students. I often take an example and adjust it to suit the students I am currently working with."

Science Contract #3
MAMMALS

I, _____, agree to prepare a learning centre for the resource centre about the mammal of my choice.

I would like to work

❑ on my own

❑ with a partner My partner is _____

The mammal I choose is the _____

There are several steps to completing the learning centre. Check with your teacher after completing each step.

1. Do research DUE _____

2. Decide on at least 4 activities for your centre based on the research DUE _____

3. Decide how each activity will be presented (tape, video or filmstrip, pictures, games, etc.) Think about having 4 different ways. DUE _____

4. Make the activities for the centre. DUE _____

5. Set up your centre in the resource centre. DUE _____

6. Observe students working at your centre at 3 different times. Evaluate how effective your centre is for teaching others about your mammal. DUE _____

I agree to complete the centre by the due date. I understand that work not completed in class will have to be done at home.

x _____ (student)

I understand that _____ has agreed to complete a centre about the_____.

x _____ (parent)

I will give necessary help and support. I will return materials and have meetings as promptly as possible.

x _____ (teacher)

INVOLVE PARENTS

"With this contract each student and I filled in the blanks together. It helped to have the parents involved from the start. This is a basic contract I have adapted for a variety of grade levels, integrated units, and different subjects."

"I have also used centres and packages with the various levels I have taught—my elementary students used these in different ways than my middle years students, high school students, university students, and the teachers I have worked with — to address the wide range of abilities and interests you find in any group. For me there are several consistent elements when using packages, centres, or contracts regardless of the grade level..."

You write as the teacher shares these elements...

COMMON ELEMENTS (PACKAGES AND CENTRES)

- *"multi-modal" — activities and things to manipulate, using senses to process information*
- *clear instructions and objectives; rationale and the reasons for students to do the activities*
- *lots of choice for the students at various levels of difficulty*
- *immediate feedback from the teacher, marking guide, peers, etc.*
- *record keeping mechanisms in place*
- *developing skills as required*
- *self-assessment and criteria*
- *resources that are available in the school and community*

CONTRACTS

- *contain*
  - *time lines*
  - *outline of topics to be studied*
  - *examples when appropriate*
  - *suggested assignments from which students choose*
  - *self-tests if appropriate*
- *clear language to state agreed upon expectations*
- *student input and tailored to student needs*
- *room for teacher and student to sign (parent, too?)*
- *For me a centre is...* _____
  a package is... _____
  a contract is... _____

As you write you try to picture how the teacher would have prepared centres for the different levels. You are familiar with centres at the elementary level but middle years? high school? university? teacher inservice???

Almost as if the teacher has read your mind...

"It is the same and different using centres at different grade levels and in different subject areas. I know some teachers think centres are just for elementary students but I have found them to be valuable at every level.

"For example, I used centres with grade 7's for a unit on the Pacific Rim. Each centre was like a tourist booth or a Folkfest pavilion for a specific country. The students chose a number of the centres to visit. At the end of the unit they compared countries from a number of perspectives.

"Another year, I set up different centres that helped students gathering information about different countries in the Pacific Rim. There was a postal station with addresses, and materials for writing away for information from consulates. At another centre P.C. Globe was loaded on the computer. Maps of all descriptions were at another centre and so on. Students adopted a country to research throughout the year from the different perspectives of our studies. It culminated with students developing tourist centres for their classmates.

"Science classes at all grade levels transfer easily into centres...a magnet centre to experiment with magnetic properties, the aquarium with observation suggestions, a small appliance repair centre AFTER completing a unit on electricity, gardening centres...and centres can supplement our unit of study and present new concepts. They are very versatile. Students also have more opportunity to learn from each other. And centres are useful when we are short of resources.

"English was more challenging for centres but I used the same centres year long, changing the materials at each centre to correspond to what we were studying. There was a journal centre with entry suggestions changed frequently to reflect the current unit of study; a creative response centre stocked with supplies for drama, painting, drawing, collage, or writing; a listening centre stocked with book tapes from the library to encourage reading; a computer centre for preparing assignments; and interpretation and

ANY GRADE

ANY SUBJECT

SOME EXAMPLES

ELEMENTARY
HIGH SCHOOL
POST-SECONDARY
IN-SERVICE

analysis centre with discussion questions. Used in conjunction with contracts they provided opportunities for students to make choices and decisions about their work, and added more variety to our class. Setting the centres up initially took time but up-dating them regularly went quickly. Teacher's guides like the one for *Tapestries: Short Stories From the Pacific Rim* are full of ideas that translate easily into centres. Actually there is a lot of good information out there. I'll send you a list of resources I have found helpful.

"Anyway, with second year education students at the university level, I used centres to reinforce the skills of objective writing, and linking objectives and evaluation. That experience reminded me just how critical it is to teach the necessary skills ahead of time. The experience was overwhelming for a few of the students who were more comfortable with a traditional lecture style class. Others found the experience very valuable.

"When we discussed their reactions to the class later, the favourite centres were the games and those that reinforced the concepts through metaphor. The pre-test and post-test scores showed improvement in the skills the centres targeted. This year I am going to incorporate packages for the course that encourage students to explore a few areas in greater depth."

"At teacher workshops centres are helpful for individualizing in a group with diverse interests and for modelling different ways of individualizing within a group."

And in this class...?

"Oh, in this class students are working on projects they have chosen themselves working with a detailed contract. Our theme is Diversity and their projects will culminate in centres for their classmates and parents that reflect some aspect of Diversity. So what you see here today are students in the middle of their own projects."

You then comment on how the students seemed to be so involved in what they were doing and how smoothly things seemed to run when you were observing the class.

The teacher laughs, "It wasn't always this way, believe me! When I first started using centres, packages and contracts, I felt like I was in the middle of

CHAOS! So many questions being fired from every direction, chasing students from here to there, trying to gain some kind of control. It was awful for me and certainly not a successful experience for many of the students. Students didn't seem to know what to do. Although some students just took to centres like ducks to water, most were easily distracted and quickly went off task.

"I can remember thinking 'either I will never do this again or I am going to find out how to do this so it works!' I had seen enough of a positive response from a handful of the students to have a glimmer of hope that centres COULD work. I had a plan of action...my own self-directed learning plan...

"I attended a workshop and got the basics, and started to track down the recommended resources. There were so many things available that I felt overwhelmed so I got in touch with a colleague of mine who extended an open invitation to come and see centres in action, and gave me this checklist."

You glance over the list the teacher hands you...

To develop a centre or package ...
1. Determine the purpose.
2. Define specific objectives that students will understand and determine evaluation techniques.
3. Plan a variety of activities from which students can choose.
4. Order the activities according to levels of difficulty. Collect materials and assemble.
5. Prepare clear directions and provide organizational information.
6. Reflect upon the success of the centres/package and consider the implications for future developments.

Clear Objectives

The teacher continues, "I realized that I had not been clear with myself about why I was using centres and because I didn't have a clear idea, it wasn't clear to the students. It is so important to discuss the 'big picture' with the students. They benefit from knowing how this all fits together and the reasons for doing it in this way."

The teacher talks about when it seems most appropriate to use centres and packages and you take notes....

When to Use Centres and Packages

- *when you have limited resources*
- *to sharpen observational skills*
- *make fresh associations*
- *follow-up the teacher's lesson*
- *to encourage student choice, responsibility and decision making*
- *to provide an opportunity for alternate ways of learning*
- *an area for independent study*
- *for instruction of specific skills and knowledge*
- *for the development of critical and creative thinking*
- *as enrichment*
- *to promote exploration, self-discovery, and leisure learning*
- *to practice a skill*
- *to develop basic skills*
- *to explore a concept*
- *to meet individual as well as small and large group needs*
- *at all grade levels*
- *in all subject areas*

- *Centres and packages "offer a means of organizing and directing learning experiences by allowing learners freedom to choose while at the same time providing a necessary structure" (Stoltz & Saloom, 1977).***check this one!*

- *Contracts can also be used at all grade levels and in all subject areas. Contracts accompany something else; they are a way to ensure no misunderstandings in expectations such as assignment requirements, procedures, criteria for evaluation, and due dates.*

I could use centres to _____

_____

I could use contracts to _____

_____

I could use packages to _____

_____

Clear Instructions

The teacher continues, "I also realized that a big part of the problem was that the instructions were not clear enough for the students to understand on their own. That's why I was running around trying to answer everyone's questions and why students who didn't ask or were frustrated found something else to do.

"I thought about a time when I had tried to read the manual for a new software program. I had no clue! It was easier when I talked to a friend who was already using the program. We could figure things out together. So when it came to preparing centres again...I hadn't given up!.. I really worked at making the directions clear AND we used peer partner learning and cooperative learning. This helped to make things move more smoothly."

The teacher hands you a couple of resources to add to your growing stack of information — *Picture Peer Partner Learning* and *Opening the Door to Cooperative Learning*. The teacher resumes...

Start Simple

"After observing my colleague and talking about centres, I knew I had tried to do too much at once. The students and I needed a chance to learn together and develop our skills. We started by doing something much more structured. I set up work stations with their regular assignments in different locations in the room. This gave them a chance to become familiar with working in cooperative learning groups and moving more in the classroom. We also used the idea of independent work days. Students designed their own schedules for half days based on the guidelines of a TO DO list. By doing this they had an opportunity to organize their work for themselves. The students worked well in this kind of situation and it gave me a chance to practice being less directive while being able to work more closely with individual students. My role changed to one of facilitator rather than director or teacher.

Centres to Teach

"I remember that when I first tried centres I used them for those who finished their work early or for enrichment, but when I saw how valuable it was for students to work in this way, I began to use centres as a strategy for instruction rather than a 'filler'.

"I also noticed while I watched the students working how individual they were in their approaches and what they chose to do to fulfil the requirements of their assignments. In the next set of centres, I worked hard to

Include Options

include lots of options from which students could choose. I thought about learning styles and modalities and incorporated this into the activities. Bloom's taxonomy was a big help in preparing the activities. For me, a centre is more than worksheets beside a colorful bulletin board.

"I borrowed as many materials as I could as well as buying ready-made centre ideas and asking parent-volunteers to prepare centre materials. Other teachers here at school were interested so we prepared centres together and circulated them."

You jot down the names of colleagues you know who have used centres or might be interested in working together _____

_____

_____

and parents who might be willing to help out _____

_____

_____

Share Ideas

When you look up you realize that it is quiet. The teacher continues...

"You know, since visiting my colleague's classroom I have called several times over the years just to clarify my ideas and check things out — much in the same way you are doing today!"

You thank the teacher for sharing these ideas and experiences and head back to your own school where you take the time to jot a few reminder notes to yourself...

Considerations

- *prepare the students by teaching the necessary skills to make beginning experiences successful and positive*

- *start small, and help and guide students take on more and more responsibility*

- *start with short simple tasks rather than long complex ones*

*** Check with other teachers that the students may be working with to make sure they aren't getting centre overload!!! Too much of a good thing is no longer a good thing.*

Tips

- *Analyze own tolerance level for students going in a variety of directions all at the same time.*

- *Be prepared for the student who has signed a contract and has decided to spend class time visiting while doing the work at home.*

- *Watch for the "artist" who has perfected looking busy while doing nothing.*

- *Start small for your sake and for the sake of the students.*

- *Adapt what you are currently using to start off with centres and packages.*

- *Collaborate with colleagues for development "bees" and exchange centres, and packages — What can you beg, borrow or steal...with permission of course!*

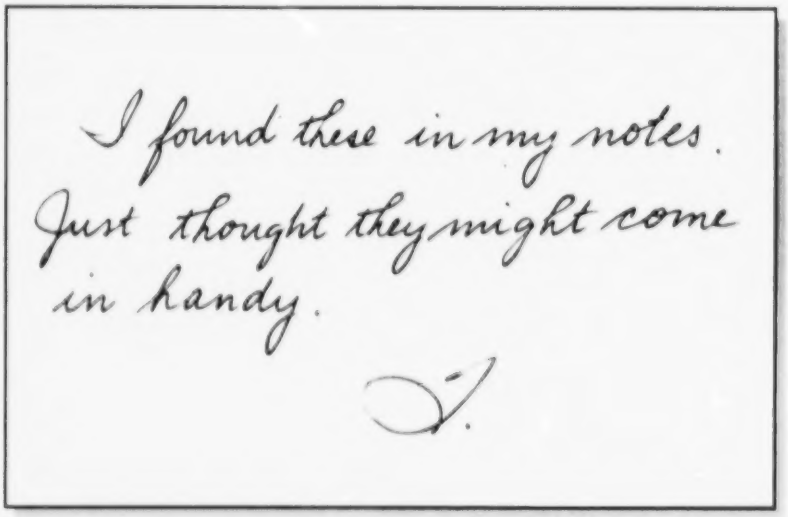
- *Beware the worksheets-on-wheels centre. Even changing location may not make a worksheet more motivating and exciting for the student.*

- *Provide immediate feedback to the student directly or through self-correction, peers, etc.*

- *Change activity at the peak of interest rather than letting it go too long. Examine decision-making processes.*

- *Involve students in creating the centre, package or contract.*

Later that month, after developing a few centres for your students to use, a sheet appears in your mail box.



The Teacher's Role

1. Determine if centres or packages are to be used by:
   - the entire class at the same time (a regular time during the day or week or during a regular class period),
   - students as they complete assignments – CAUTION when using this method
   - individuals or small groups as an instructional strategy

2. Teach students the skills they will need to succeed with the centre or package.
   - academic skills
   - group skills
   - organizational skills & personal record keeping
   - time management
   - goal setting
   - decision making

3. Create record-keeping systems so you can easily track who has done what.

4. Circulate as the students are using the centres and packages. This is an opportunity to work with individual students. "Golden opportunities" to experience teachable moments with individuals happen when:
   - directions are clear,
   - activities are inviting & challenging yet achievable,
   - there are many activities to choose from, and
   - students are comfortable with the procedures.

5. Evaluate the centre or package and make the changes that would enhance it for the next time. (Old centres never die, they just get updated and improved!)

6. Reflect on student learning and the impact of centres, packages and contracts. How can you use this new knowledge in day-to-day teaching?

Centres & Student Evaluation

On-going Data Collection

Anecdotal Records

Folders

Journals and Learning Logs

Student Reflection and Self-evaluation

Group and Peer Evaluation

Also included in the package is the list of resources the teacher promised. You file it away for future reference.

A year later

...while attending an internship workshop, you run into the teacher again. During a break you share some of the things you have learned about using centres, packages, and contracts...involving students in the development

...supporting those students who want a "right" answer, those who are easily distracted, and those who need a great deal of direction initially

...balancing quiet centres with noisier centres

...informing staff about what you are doing

...encouraging respect for the work of others

...introducing a centre to the entire group before students start using it and working through contracts and packages thoroughly before students begin

...not over-using centres, packages, or contracts

During the discussion you notice the interest of your interns. You and the teacher exchange knowing looks and continue onto your next session.

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